

Idaho Vineyards Producing Large Fruit Loads

With Idaho's wine grape harvest winding down, vintners say total production this year will be well above normal. Growers in both North and South Idaho are reporting huge crop loads

*by Sean Ellis
Capital Press*

CALDWELL, Idaho — Wine grape production in Idaho this year is shaping up to be well above normal and substantially more than last year.

"The quality is great and yields were heavy this year," said Williamson Orchards co-owner Michael Williamson. "It looks like an excellent year for Idaho wine."

Idaho growers produced 2,472 tons of wine grapes last year, well below the five-year average of 2,816 tons. But yields this year are at least 20 percent above last year, said winemaker Martin Fujishin.

A bitter January cold snap and unusually hot temperatures last year reduced the size of the 2013 crop, said Fujishin, who teaches viticulture at Treasure Valley Community College.

There have been some weather issues during 2014, "but nothing quite as bad as we saw last year and, boy, that sure makes a big difference in yields," he said.

Fujishin hasn't harvested his Riesling crop yet and he said that crop looks big and could push his overall yields up to 20 percent above normal and more than 30 percent above last year.

Weather conditions were almost ideal this year, said Huston Vineyards owner Gregg Alger.

"We have huge fruit loads. Everything just blew the forecast numbers out this year," he said. "It was a really, really optimum year. We had the right conditions at the right time."

However, fruit loads in some cases have been too high for Alger, who still has 5 tons of Riesling grapes hanging in his vineyard but has no container space left.

"It may just rot on the vine," he said.

Idaho's 51 wineries produce about 180,000, 12-bottle cases of wine per year.

Idaho's wine grape harvest, which typically starts in September and pushes into November, is quickly wrapping up, with the exception of some late-season varieties and grapes used to make ice wines.

"The crop looks good," said Maurine Johnson, winemaker for Ste. Chapelle, by far Idaho's largest winery, which contracts about 500 vineyard acres. "There is plenty of quantity and quality is really good."

The majority of the state's vineyards and wineries are located near Caldwell in Southwestern Idaho, but wineries in North Idaho are also reporting large crop loads.



“It looks stellar,” said Mike Pearson of Colters Creek Vineyard and Winery near Lewiston. “Crop loads are ... on average, 50 percent over what they were last year. Across the board, quality is as good as we’ve (ever) seen.”



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